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ABSTRACT

In an episode of MASH in which Radar O'Reiley takes a correspondence course in writing, Col. Potter advises him, "The first rule if you want to be a writer is to be yourself." But what if O'Reiley wrote a series of stories about a corporal's negotiating his place in a system which urges, "don't ask, don't tell?" The colonel's advice "be yourself" quickly becomes complicated. And so does the advice of creative writing instructors who urge their students to write from their own experience if the student writing is in some way uncommon. Should he or she choose, or have the courage, to write from their experiences, they are likely to challenge some fundamental assumptions of both the instructor and the other students. Their work, in fact, may not make full sense to many of its readers. The experiences of those whose identities are marked by the culture--marked as not-straight, not-white, not-male, etc.--are paradoxically invisible to individuals not marked. More often than not, when a student "knows" something which exceeds the knowledge of his or her instructor, which is in other words un-knowable, then this knowledge is interpreted as confusion or inability on the part of the student. When the literary models provided to a student are insufficient, or when the available forms are inappropriate to her content, instructors can dismiss her as inarticulate. Or they can interrogate their own position with regard to the assumptions underlying the work. (TB)

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The Radar O'Reiley School of Creative Writing:

Or, Ottumwa Sure Is a Long Way from Iowa City

Some time ago, as I was preparing this paper, I engaged in my midnight ritual of MASH, a blanket, and a beer, and I caught an episode which I had not before seen. The subplot of this episode was Radar's desire to improve himself through his enrollment in a correspondence course offered by the "Famous Las Vegas Writers School." The text for this course seemed to be a pamphlet filled with such imaginative and detailed assignments as "Relate an amusing anecdote." As one would expect, the entire camp became involved in Radar's plight, especially when he constructed such sentences as, "The wounded were aided copiously by super surgeons." Naturally, at the end of the episode, Col. Potter exercised his role as patriarch of the unit and offered Radar this bit of avuncular advice: "The first rule if you want to be a writer is to be yourself."

Obviously, this sounded vaguely familiar to me, although we writing teachers generally advise students who to "be" only implicitly, preferring instead to advise them what to write about, i.e. what they know about, i.e. "be yourself." Simultaneously, however, I wondered how Radar would do in the writing classes I teach, or in any of those I've taken. I suspect he would do "fine," that is, he would emerge knowing a little bit more about metaphor as well as about the strengths and weaknesses of his thesaurus, and, one hopes, he would remain willing, perhaps even eager, to exercise his recently acquired knowledge. At worst, he might have taken some ribbing about his status as a fellow from the heartland by his so-sophisticated classmates from the coasts, but although the geographic center of this country is traditionally culturally marginalized, such a heritage is generally not so shameful that one censors it out of one's plots.

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Then I wondered what would happen if Radar weren't such a reliably nice boy from Iowa, if his expectations weren't that he would go home, finish growing up, get married, and have a passel of kids. What if, to update MASH a couple of generations, Radar were discharged, went home, enrolled in a local creative writing course, and wrote a series of stories about a corporal's negotiating his place in a system which urges, "don't ask, don't tell"? The colonel's advice simply to "be yourself" quickly becomes complicated. For despite our best intentions, most of us, as well as most of our students, remain substantially constructed by a cultural system which exploits binary models in order to mark particular identities as other while erasing and hence normalizing any given opposite term. The academy, at least that portion of it classified as humanities, has begun to address the paradoxical situation that those we call other are within us. Pages of this year's convention program testify to that tendency, and virtually every major journal in the profession has devoted a recent issue to what we have come to call "multiculturalism"; much has been written and said about the learning styles of women or men, white students or students of color, native speakers or ESL students.

It seems to me, though, that the focus of much of this work hinges on a definition of the student as one who either acquires knowledge or is the object of knowledge. In the writing classroom, however, the boundary between the student's role in acquiring knowledge and the student's role in producing knowledge is fluid, if it exists at all. And there's the rub, for the products of some student writers, the poems and plays and short stories of students who are in one way or another un-common, whose experience is not held in common, are likely to challenge some fundamental assumptions held by their instructors and classmates. I am obviously speaking here of perception, for a bildungsroman which narrates the story of a boy lighting out for the territory reveals "the" classic American experience only because we (or they) say so, while an analogous tale contained, for example, in Jeannette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, of a young lesbian learning to reject what she's been taught does not have similar universal

value precisely because we (or they) also say so. As literature traditionally has been and frequently continues to be taught, Huck Finn contains multitudes, that is, all of us, while Jeanette, the narrator/protagonist of Winterson's novel, contains handfuls, that is, those of us whose autobiography happens to coincide in some way with Winterson's own. Yet I would argue that this specific perception of value produces virtually all of the constraint which operates in the classroom defined as a site of power. A student is urged, in other words, to write about what she knows about, but she is simultaneously and not so surreptitiously compelled to know only that which conforms to the experience and assumptions of her instructor and peers. When a student "knows" something which does exceed the cultural knowledge of her instructor, which is in other words un-knowable, then this knowledge is interpreted as confusion or inability on the part of the student. When the literary models provided to a student are insufficient, when the available forms are inappropriate to her content, we as instructors can dismiss her as inarticulate. Or we can interrogate our own position with regard to the assumptions underlying the work.

In *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, Joanna Russ relates an anecdote which illustrates this point. Serving on an admissions committee for a creative writing program with two male colleagues, she says that although their rankings of the top half of the applications were "almost identical," and although her ranking of the top male applicants was "almost identical" to the rankings of her colleagues, her "ranking of the top twenty samples of the prose and verse written by women was almost exactly the inverse of theirs" (45). One of the examples she cites concerns a story in which

> the female protagonist [is] lying in bed next to her sleeping husband, wishing she had the courage to hit him over the head with a frying pan. . . . My colleagues, who did not like the story, could not understand why the protagonist was so angry; my explanations (which connected the story with feminist consciousness) brought from one only the polite but baffled

> response that the story was about "a failure in human communications" in that particular marriage. (45)

The story, in other words, is interpreted to concern an anomalous rather than a universal or even collective experience, and presumably this student was not admitted, since Russ later reveals that "None of the women admitted into the program was my choice. None of my female choices were accepted into the program" (46).

Reading this, one must at least ask about the relationship(s) between content and perceptions of talent, relationships which are analogous to those between experience and/or identity and judgments regarding aesthetic value. Among the problems with this arrangement is the fact that the *experiences* of individuals whose identities are marked by the culture--marked as not-straight, not-white, not-male, etc.--are paradoxically invisible to individuals who are not marked. That is, it would seem, when the body is marked, the body is all; the body performs only its identity and has no other agency to create experience which would be foreign to unmarked individuals, for experience which is foreign to unmarked individuals does not exist. A marked individual, in other words, exists in relation to the dominant culture only according to that mark, functioning like a cigar store Indian who serves simply as a reminder to its audience, with all of the action remaining in the head of the audience. I am reminded here of the movie *Philadelphia*, a movie purportedly about AIDS and about two gay men in particular, but which clearly understands its audience to be straight to such an extent that its predominant concern is not how gays build a subculture within or against a dominant culture, or how gays survive in a straight world, but rather how straights come to acknowledge the existence of gays now that "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it" has made national headlines. To the extent, then, that experience foreign to unmarked individuals is permitted to exist, it is valued only to the extent that it responds to those same unmarked readers and/or spectators.

Hence the problem I see in our classrooms. *Write about what you know about*, we say to our students, yet simultaneously we insist, *write for me*. So, much does not get written. This is particularly true, I think, among gay and lesbian students, especially among those who pass, intentionally or not, as straight. Although one can avoid pronouns for only so long, all students (and instructors) pass as straight until their performance testifies otherwise, since all of us are assumed to be straight by our straight peers nearly to the same extent that we are assumed to be earthlings. As I see it, gay and lesbian student writers, at least until they are substantially out, generally have three uncomfortable options: 1. they can actively perform straight impersonations, writing tales of marriage and woe, impersonations which may be highly successful since gays and lesbians do know how to negotiate the straight world as a simple matter of survival, but impersonations which are nevertheless destined to be constrained by self-censorship; 2. they can write more directly out of their own experience while changing small words like pronouns, perhaps the least effective strategy since critiques of and insights into the center from the margins reveal much more than merely the gender of the person sitting across from the protagonist, ordering a second cup of coffee with the cheesecake, leaving a generous tip, and turning the dial to jazz on the drive home; or 3. they can essentially come out each new semester by consistently incorporating gay content into their work. When I express a preference for this third option, however, I cannot help but remember the famous professor at my own undergraduate institution who informed us early and often that she considered heterosexual expressions of identity the only legitimate ones.

Obviously, in making these statements, I am assuming a fairly strong if not always direct autobiographical influence on student writing. I do not think this is a rash or hasty assumption, and in fact, I do suspect that many students enroll in creative writing classes specifically as a means of making sense out of their own lives, just as many of us continue to write in part out of our urge to make sense of, or perhaps create order in, our own lives. The primary difference in this respect between beginning and more advanced

writers, I would argue, is that experienced writers are more adept at camouflage, at imagining memory, and that more experienced writers have often learned to thrust their own lives into a larger portion of the world. So the greater danger lies not in a student's overzealous reliance on memory, on an insistence that a motorcycle in a story be a Harley Davidson because "that's the way it really happened," but in a student's feeling compelled to avoid memory, to write from the mainstream, to be an acceptable person. And the fact is that despite our insistence in literature courses on a distinction between the poet and the speaker or the author and the narrator, student writers often do assume that the work of their peers is disguised autobiography--just listen to how often they refer to the narrator as "you" when addressing the writer.

When marginalized students do write out of their experience, however, we must also remember that their assumed audience might not coincide with the membership--students and instructor--of the class. As instructors, we need to become suspicious when the content of student work "baffles" us rather than dismiss it as perhaps lacking in aesthetic appeal. As Russ points out, the daily lives of many women, as those lives may appear in literature, do baffle many male readers, or analogously, as Richard Wright points out in *Native Son*, the logical choices of some black characters is entirely outside of the comprehension of most white characters. What *Native Son*, among other novels, has done within the dominant culture, however, is create comprehensibility for the actions of Bigger Thomas. I would argue that this is among the tasks of our time for lesbian and gay writing.

In her essay "The Trojan Horse," Monique Wittig articulates the necessary conjunction between the writer's material as an individual and the writer's task as a member of a culture, even a culture which declines to acknowledge the writer's presence:

> For in literature, history, I believe, intervenes at the individual and subjective level and manifests itself in the particular point of view of the writer. It is then one of the most vital and strategic parts of the writer's

> task to universalize this point of view. But to carry out a literary work one must be modest and know that being gay or anything else is not enough. For reality cannot be directly transferred from the consciousness to the book. The universalization of each point of view demands a particular attention to the formal elements that can be open to history, such as themes, subjects of narratives, as well as the global form of the work. (74-75)

Earlier in this essay, Wittig has insisted that she is not speaking of "committed literature" when she discusses transferring reality to the book; she is not talking, then, about fiction or poetry which might as easily have been sermon or editorial. She is referring to the passion of the writer for his or her material, the compulsion to write experience into existence, the urgency Quentin Compson feels, for example, when Shreve McCannon suggests that he "tell about the South." Tell he does, and in a form that would seem nonsensical to us were we unwilling to make continuous leaps of faith.

If this "universalization of each point of view" is to occur, we need energetic readers as well as passionate writers. If, as I would argue, much of the most provocative writing emerges out of experiences of alienation, we need writers who recognize the legitimacy of a marginalized point of view and readers who are willing to do more than concede to bafflement when the content of a piece of literature does not conform to their own experience. In this sense, perhaps the greatest challenge to instructors of creative writing classes will not be to their political agenda but to their humility. For universalizing a point of view does not simply mean speaking to the mainstream; it does not mean explaining or justifying an individual perspective until it becomes palatable to a mainstream audience. If we describe the mood of marginalized writing as imperative--"Read this"--I would want further to characterize its nature as a dare rather than a plea.

It would seem that I've strayed a long way from Radar's Famous Las Vegas Writer's School, but then many of the problems we confront in writing classes exist

precisely because we have students whose material bodies stand before us. Impersonate who they will, they nevertheless inscribe their bodies on the paper they distribute as their work. Those of us who continue to utter, "write about what you know about" need to become more prepared for those students who take us seriously.

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